



## A Territorialized Memory of Colombian Conflict

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A review of *Huellas de desaparición: Los casos de Urabá, Palacio de Justicia y territorio Nukak* (Traces of Disappearance: The Cases of Urabá, Palace of Justice and Nukak Territory), an exhibition held in Bogotá, Colombia, at the Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia (MAMU), December 10 to July 18, 2021, and in Medellín, Colombia, at the Museo de Antioquia, September 15, 2022 to January 2, 2023; the exhibition was curated by Forensic Architecture and the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad la Convivencia y la No Repetición de la Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (JEP). The exhibition used architectural tools to reconstruct three episodes of the Colombian armed conflict: the displacement of the Nukak Indigenous people, the dispossession of Campesino farmers to accommodate banana plantations for multinational companies, and the response of Colombian armed forces to the siege of Colombia's Palace of Justice.

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*Huellas de desaparición* (Traces of Disappearance) is a traveling exhibition documenting the outcomes of three investigative projects undertaken by Forensic Architecture (FA). It originated as part of the final report of Colombia's Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad la Convivencia y la No Repetición de la Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (JEP) (Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition), within the framework of the 2016 peace accord between the FARC guerrilla group and the Colombian government.

FA's eclectic work falls within what has been labeled the 'forensic turn'. This term could be defined as an attempt 'to salvage the word "forensics"' by exploring its potential as a political, cultural, theoretic, and aesthetic concept and thereby to 'wrest it from the grip of state agencies and bureaucratic processes' (Weizman 2017: 65; Dziuban 2017: 11).

In this exhibition, FA worked for the first time with an official truth commission, and it is one of the very few occasions on which FA has acted as part of a government body. In this case it assumed the role of an official information management system by collecting, interpreting, and displaying multimedia data that formed an official version — although devoid of legal implications — of three episodes in the Colombian conflict. In this way, FA helped the commission to fulfill its aim of elucidating 'the truth of what happened in the context of the internal armed conflict, to shed light on the violations committed therein, and to offer society a broad explanation of its complexity' (Comisión de la Verdad 2019).

The FA's first project, *La Selva Detectada* (The Jungle Detected) (**Figure 1**), analyzed the displacement of the Nukak Indigenous people, which began in 1988 and continues to this day. The second one, *Despojo y Memoria de la Tierra* (Dispossession and the Memory of the Earth) (**Figure 2**), tackled the dispossession of Campesino farmers to accommodate banana plantations for multinational companies, which got underway in the 1960s and continues to present day. The third one, *Las Cajas Negras de la Desaparición Forzada* (The Black Boxes of Disappearance) (**Figure 3, Figure 4**), investigated the response of Colombian armed forces to the siege of Colombia's Palace of Justice in November 6 and 7, 1985. Each project was shown as a stand-alone work with an independent section in the exhibition. They were developed with a system FA calls 'open verification' that uses conventional data analysis methods appropriated from different disciplinary contexts such as audio analysis, data mining, fieldwork image analysis, photogrammetry, synchronization pattern analysis, and complex remote sensing, along with new ones that FA has created, like situated testimony and fieldwork ground truth. They were undertaken by an interdisciplinary group of artists, architects, filmmakers, lawyers, historians, community members, and witnesses (Forensic Architecture 2022). Applying common 2D, 3D, and physical modeling, animation and visualization techniques from

architecture, and graphic and game design to synthesize the information received, FA was able to analyze a vast number of legal documents, newspaper articles, aerial photographs, personal journals, TV news footage, radio communications recordings, digital and physical databases, interviews in different formats, and other materials. This material was displayed in its original format — in the form of an archive — but was also synthesized into infographics, maps, animations, and digital and physical models.



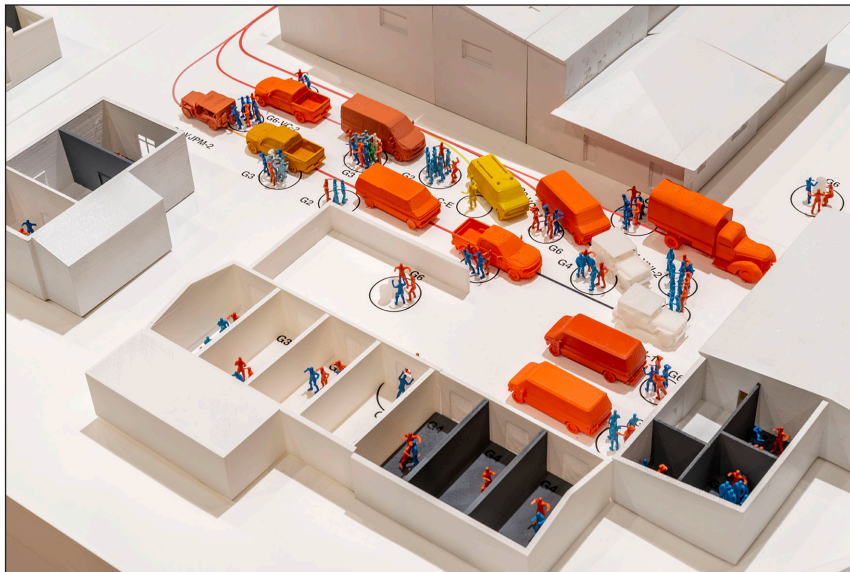
**Figure 1:** 'The Jungle Detected' section at Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia, Bogotá. Photo by Banco de la República, 2022.



**Figure 2:** 'Dispossession and the Memory of the Earth' section at Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia, Bogotá. Photo by Banco de la República, 2022.



**Figure 3:** 'The Black Boxes of Disappearance' section at Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia, Bogotá. Photo by Oscar Monsalve, 2022.



**Figure 4:** 'The Black Boxes of Disappearance' section at Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia, Bogotá. Photo by Oscar Monsalve, 2022.

The first project presented a mural that mapped out the process of alterations produced by western settlers to the territory of the Nukak Indigenous people in the Guaviare region and showed the transformation of the northern boundary of Amazon jungle along with that of the habitat of this nomadic group. The second offered a 3D

reconstruction of a landscape of one hundred square kilometers in the Nueva Colonia jurisdiction (Urabá Antioqueño) that has gradually been lost to the sea and to banana plantations, using Forensic Architecture's situated testimony method through which peasants help build the landscape as they 'walk' through 3D digital environments (Comisión de la Verdad 2021). This work included videos, interviews, documentaries, 3D animations, maps of the territory, infographics of bank transactions and land transfers, and the input data presented as an archive. The third and most developed project recorded details about the movement and location of people in relation to the buildings, urban settings, public spaces, and objects surrounding the actions of the Colombian security forces in the aftermath of the siege of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, when cafeteria workers, students, visitors, guerrilla members, and judges were disappeared. Three videos, physical and digital architectural models, and several maps and research books display the input data and research results.

FA not only addressed its regular audiences of legal, political and research actors, and an art-and-architecture-interested public in this exhibition but also targeted common people. These three projects act therefore as research instruments for truth seeking, as dissemination media, and as works of art.

In these projects' capacity as research instruments for truth seeking they serve as an 'information management system' that synthesizes quantitative and qualitative information, helping the commission to make sense of the raw data collected. Audrey Chapman and Patrick Bal explain this process: 'The volume and complexity of data sources truth commissions collect requires rigorous and systematic analysis. The information analyzed in the report must fairly represent the narratives presented by statement givers. Attempts to document the abuses and write official histories need objective and compelling means' (2001: 28).

Presenting those narratives and its inputs to the public constituted the exhibition's second role as dissemination media. As the first attempt by the commission to explain the conflict's complexity to Colombian society, it became a partial interim center of memory. But — although this role required it — this exhibition did not achieve total clarity in its depiction of facts (as neither does FA's work in in many cases). Talking about the convincing success of FA's works as opposed to their aesthetic strength, Michel Feher mocks FA's director Eyal Weizman by false-quoting him: 'We did not win in court but at least we have set up a nice exhibition' (Bois et al. 2016:131). Anthropologist Catalina Ceballos (2022) commented on this exhibition in the same vein, saying 'it contains maps that surpass the understanding but as any work of art it is moving'. Feher's and Ceballos' words suggest that art for FA acts as a form of alibi for the other more instrumental roles.

But it is precisely this condition of alibi or of ‘diversification of forums’, as Zuzanna Dziuban puts it (2017:21), that constitutes the very essence of FA’s artistic role and of the whole ‘forensic turn’. However, although this turn constitutes the core of this exhibition’s aesthetic strength, it alone does not suffice to account for the exhibition’s artistic relevance. The archival, the memorialist, the historiographic, and the — space-time related — geographic ‘turns’ are also clearly reflected in the exhibition, and they all evince a clear underlying interest in the passage of time and, in particular, in how past events and their records are stored, displayed, and understood. Anna Maria Guasch describes the relevance of this interest in the past in contemporary art: ‘As argued by the artist and theorist Joachim Koester, while in the 19th century exploration was geographical in the search for the unknown and in the 20th century it went inwards ..., in the 21st century it is oriented backwards ... which is to say, towards the past’ (2019: 155).

FA inserts its work into this past-oriented Zeitgeist, and with this exhibition it becomes the first major foreign art player to take on the memory of Colombia’s conflict, alongside important Colombian artists of international recognition like Doris Salcedo, Oscar Muñoz, Fernando Botero, and Mapa Teatro. Their work on the conflict — now including FA’s — shapes one integral collective oeuvre that, given the local and international recognition of their creators, might become one of the most significant ones of the past decades within the global landscape of modern and contemporary art. And it can become a better way to give an account for Colombia’s conflict than other more positivist narratives, since sometimes poetry can be more powerful than truth. We look forward to seeing the work of this group of artists as a whole in one single show in the near future.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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